

Homework 101

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by Jenny Ann Frank, CSW

"Johanna, it's time to do your homework"

"But Mom, Dad..."

Sound familiar? For many parents, these words are heard from the month of September and last well into June. What can be done to maximize stronger work habits and minimize frustration for you and your child? Quite a lot.

School-to-Home Organization:

- Eliminate the risk of forgotten books/notebooks at school by asking teachers to check in with your child at the end of the day. For those children using lockers, hang a typed list on color paper reminding your child what to ask him/herself each day when packing up homework (see box, below, for example). In addition, a small index card could be taped on the cover of your child's planner.
- Advocate for a well-established communication system between home and school.

Homework Organization:

- Select a specified area for homework and necessary supplies. When completed, request that your child return all materials/supplies to their appropriate places.
- Help your child avoid avoiding homework. Work with your child on establishing rules on when and how homework will be accomplished. For example, should your child start with his favorite subject? Take a break after each assignment? How will your child know when it is time to return to work? (Verbal reminders "Johanna, just a reminder that there are only two more minutes left in your break" and timers are very effective in reminding your child to return to work.) What stimuli is acceptable or unacceptable when studying? How homework is completed is equally important as completing it.
- For weekend homework, encourage your child to begin on Friday evenings. This is invaluable. Not only is information fresh in their minds but it allows enough time to make contingency plans for forgotten books or purchasing materials for projects.
- Ask yourself: "Are the teachers giving homework and instructions that suit my child best?" If not, don't hesitate to share concerns and ideas with the teacher.
- If your child misses school, help your child be responsible for finding out the next day's homework. While there may be times your child cannot complete the homework without the classroom instruction, it is still good to have your child follow through by calling a classmate or e-mailing the teacher (if this option is available) during the day. This learned skill becomes very important by mid-elementary years and, certainly, by middle school. It further minimizes some anxiety when your child returns to school.
- For children taking medication, ask yourself and your child if he or she is finding that the medication is working as optimally as possible. Work with your professional to determine if a change may be required.

Reinforce Learning:

- Become intimate with your child's areas of need (for example, organization, inattentiveness, comprehension, decoding) and help find appropriate techniques to enhance and reinforce learning. Locate professionals early in the school year at your child's school and/or in the private sector who can provide helpful strategies.
- In general, study cards or index cards are easier than a study guide or worksheet. Have your child write words, thoughts or questions on one side and answers on the other. The act of writing out a card is one more opportunity to enhance learning by reinforcing memory.
- Use the Internet to supplement and complement classroom materials.
- For children having difficulty extracting ideas, build lists of words for your child from which to choose. Similarly, ask them to compare and contrast ideas. For those with writing challenges, there are several approaches: Have your child verbalize his or her ideas first. Use a word-web format or an old-fashioned outline using bullets before writing an essay. Encourage your child to refer to the list/chart/web/rubric and use a minimum of details (2-3 details for younger children; 4-10 details for older children).

- Consider making board games, such as a bingo or lotto board, as another way to reinforce learning. An opened manila folder works great as a board, index cards can be used for questions and coins can be a player's pawn. It is inexpensive, simple and a great addition to family time!
- Offer to give practice tests. After a few weeks of school, you will have a sense of a teacher's testing style. Practice tests that mirror the teacher's style offers your child the opportunity to "experience" what could be asked.
- Consider a study group. For slightly older children, a study group of two or three can be very beneficial and make learning more enjoyable.

The ultimate goal is to provide your special learner with good work habits, to prepare and anticipate, to avoid unnecessary tardiness and to stay on task. Par for the course with teaching organization, homework and learning strategies is making a long-term commitment. The foremost rule is to find the best system for your child; frequently this will mean many trials before finding the best one. Parental assistance can go a long way in making your child feel a sense of accomplishment and progress while minimizing stress for all of you.

[Sample card/flyer to be hung on locker door/planner]

End of the Day Reminder

Before coming home, remind or ask yourself:

- 1) to check your planner to see what homework and tests you have
- 2) to pack everything you need to complete homework (textbooks, composition books, study guides, library books, folders) and study for upcoming tests
- 3) what is inside the locker that should be somewhere else? (ie: old lunches, library books, tests needed to be signed by parents)
- 4) take home the knapsack, jacket and any other clothing/ sports gear.

Jenny A. Frank, CSW is in private practice in Westchester County, New York. Her practice includes family treatment of children with exceptionalities, individual counseling, parent support groups and parent coaching. She lectures and is published regularly on issues centering on children with special needs. She can be reached at JAFCSW@yahoo.com

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